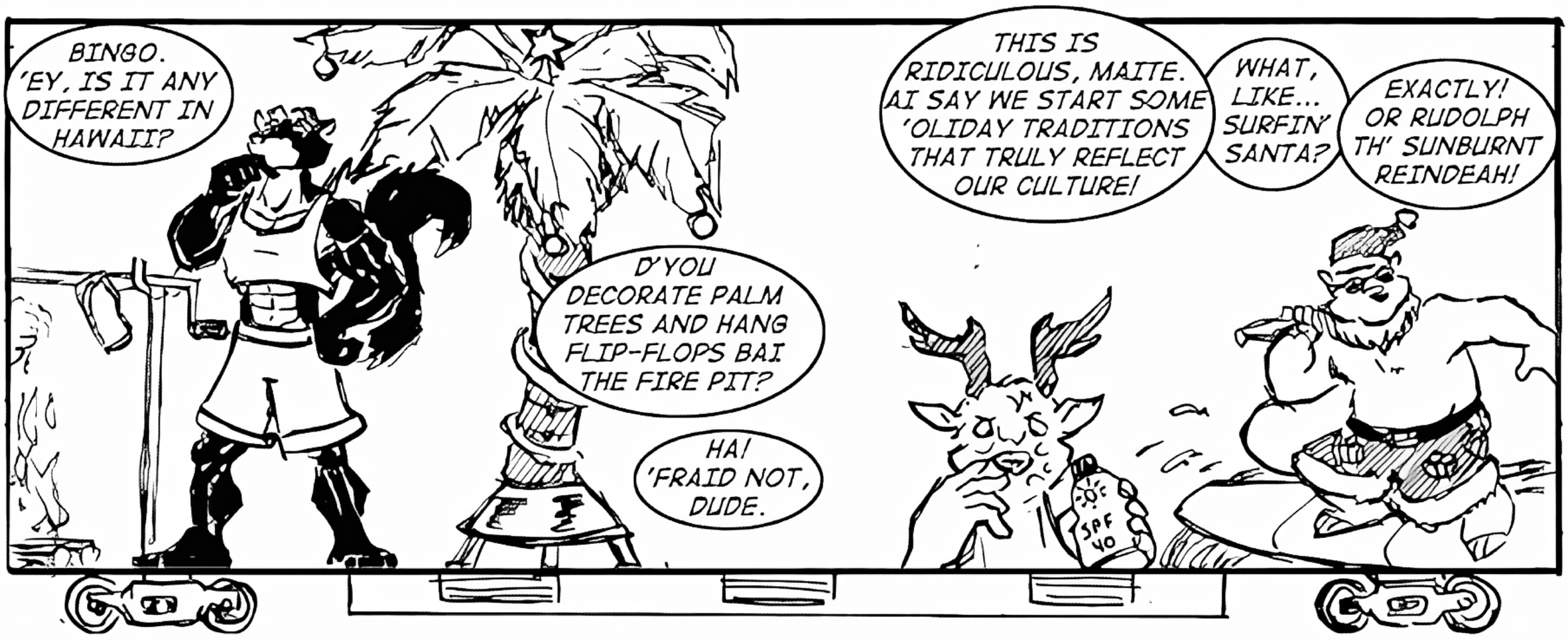


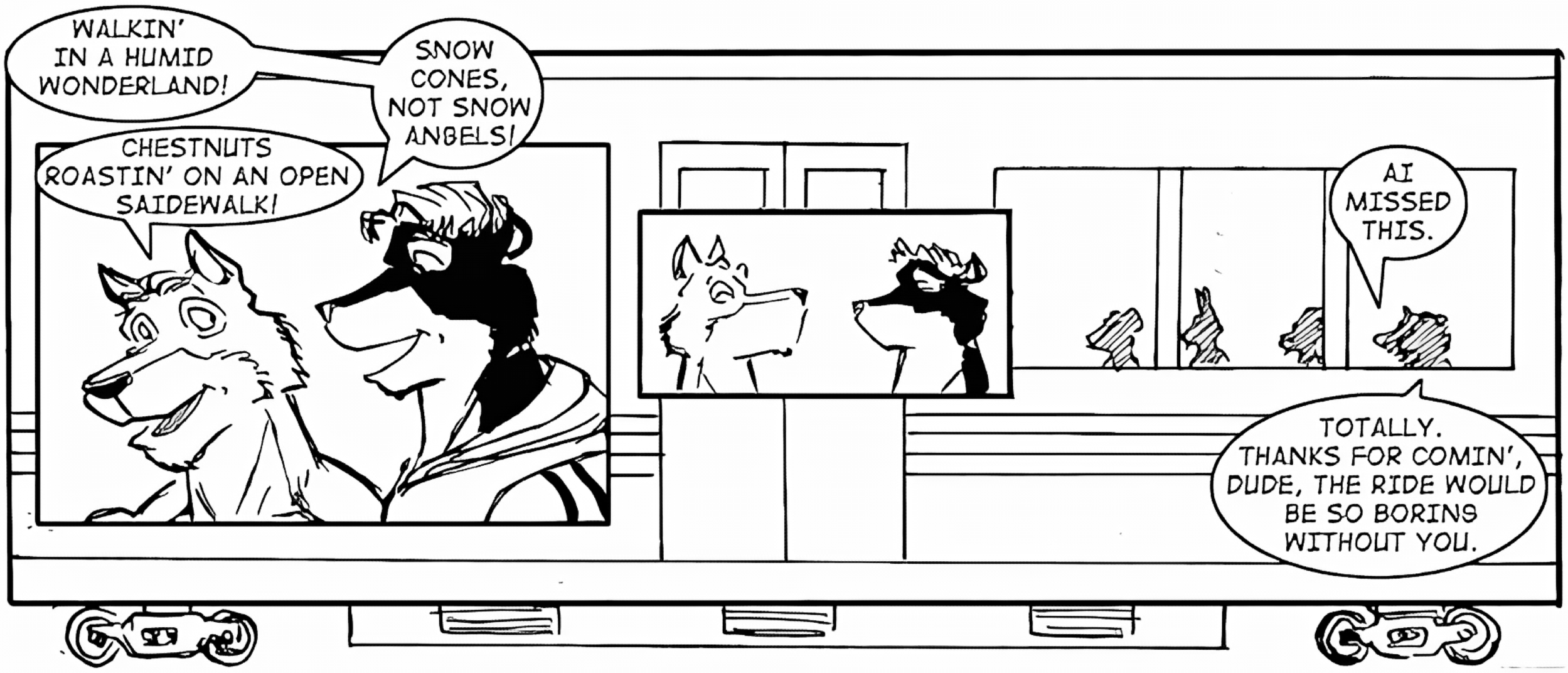
I.S.O. CHAPTER 19

IS ONLY THE BEGINNING

ART & STORY BY VINCE SUZUKAWA







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YEAH, SORREH I'VE BEEN KAINDA SCARCE. SORTA 'AD TO...REGROUP, Y'KNOW?

OH, I TOTALLY UNDERSTAND. I JUST...THINK YER THINKING TOO MUCH.

WE PROLLY WOULDN'TA DONE MUCH DIFFERENTLY IF YOU 'N' I HAD BEEN DATING, OR NOT...I DON'T SEE WHAT HASTA CHANGE NOW.

C'MON, ZACH. EVERYONE KNOWS IT'S NEVAH THE SAIME BETWEEN TWO BLOKES WHEN A SIGNIFICANT OTHAH ENTAHS TH' PICTURE.

YOU'RE WORRIED ABOUT BEING A THIRD WHEEL, HUH?

'XACTLY! PLUS...SHE'S DOWN HEAH, AND AI'M UP THEAH, SO...

HEY, HOW 'BOUT WE DOUBLE DATE?

ALLIE COULD INTRODUCE YOU TO HER CHEERLEADER FRIENDS, MAYBE.

RAIGHT... INTRODUCE.

...

WHAT, YOU MEAN YOU WENT THROUGH *ALL* OF THEM? ALREADY?! WEREN'T YOU ONLY THERE ONE WEEK?

'EY NOW, AI 'AVE NO CLASS ON TUESDAY.

BESAIDES, IT'S NAUT LAIKE THAUT MANY CHEERLEADAHS ARE SINGLE.

OH, MAN. DUDE, THIS IS...LIKE, KINDA WHY I HAD NO IDEA YOU WERE SERIOUSLY AFTER ME, Y'KNOW?

YEAH... S'POSE AI REALLY CAN'T BLAME YA.

IT'S LIKE ALWAYS *ON* WITH YOU! HOW DO YOU SHOW ANYONE THAT YOU'RE REALLY INTERESTED IN THEM?

AI...NEVER REALLY THOUGHT ABOUT IT.

BUT YOU'RE TOTALLY RAIGHT, THOUGH.

SO THAUT'S WHY AI...HM, EASIEST IF AI SHOW YA. S'KAINDA EARLY, BUT, MERREH CHRISTMAS!

HEH, THAT'S COOL, THANKS! MAYBE I CAN WEAR IT TO THE PARTY!

CAUGHT IN A RAD BROMANCE

OH, NO NO NO, IT'S NAUT FOAH *YOU*, MAITE...

CAUGHT IN A RAD BROMANCE

AI MEAN, USUALLY WE'D BOTH BE ON THE PROWL TOGETHAH... WE MADE A GOOD TEAM THAUT WAY.

BUT, YER OFF THE MARKET NOW. NO SENSE IN ME BAITIN' NEW CONQUESTS, IF THEY'D BE TEMPTIN' YOU TOO, RAIGHT?

CAUGHT IN A RAD BROMANCE

UM, THAT'S COOL, BUT...DUDE, IT JUST SEEMS WEIRD. ARE YOU ONLY DOING THIS TO PROVE A POINT? I HOPE YOU'RE NOT TRYING TO...UH...

WOT, WIN YOU OVAH? NAH, S'ALL GOOD, MAITE. NO EXPECTATIONS, HONESTLY. BUT IF WE'RE GONNA HANG OUT FOR REAL NOW, MAY AS WELL DO IT RAIGHT.

OI, IS SOMETHING ELSE WRONG?

NOT EXACTLY.

IT'S JUST... WELL, YOU'D SORTA HAVTA SEE.

MERRY CHRISTMAS TO YOU TOO, DUDE.

TURNS OUT THEY'D SOLD OUT OF THE BOXERS, SO THEY SENT ME A SHIRT INSTEAD. IT WAS TOO LATE TO MAIL IT BACK, SO...

HA! AI GUESS SOMETIMES GREAT MAINDS THINK ALAIKE...AND SOMETIMES, YOU GET LUCKY!

RAD BROMANCE

AND IT'S TH' THOUGHT THAUT COUNTS, MAITE. THANKS!

ACTUALLY...Y'KNOW, I COULD TAKE THE OTHER ONE OFF YOUR HANDS.

CAUGHT IN A RAD BROMANCE

I MEAN, IT APPLIES TO ME TOO, RIGHT?

'COURSE!

HEY, WE LAIKE, MATCH AND ALL

LAIKE TWINS, ONLY NAUT!

HA! OH MAN, THAT'S SO MAJORLY CORNY!

WE GOTTA FAIND ALLIE LAIKE THIS.

YEAH, AND LIKE, TALK AND MOVE AT THE SAME TIME. IT'LL BE HYSTERICAL.

SCREECH

UM...MAYBE YOU CAN WEAR IT LATAH.

YEAH, LIKE, AFTER WE GET OUR RIDE?

CAUGHT IN A RAD BROMANCE

FROM GROUND UP

WE SHOULDN'T BE HERE...I OUGHT TO BE PUTTING EVERYTHING TOWARDS FOR RENT NEXT MONTH AT THIS RATE.

AW, WOULD YOU STOP WORRYING? DARRYL'S NOT GOING TO CANCEL THE SHOOT!

TINA, THERE'S ABSOLUTELY NO WAY THE AGENCY WILL FIND ANOTHER DANCER BIG ENOUGH IN TIME.

BETCHA TWENTY.

YOU'RE ON.

CAN'T DENY IT'S A REFRESHING CHANGE TO FINALLY HAVE A STAR WHOSE WAIST ISN'T SMALLER THAN MY THIGH.

YEAH, REALLY.

OBVIOUSLY THE VOTERS DIDN'T GIVE A FIG WHAT SIZE SHE IS. SO WHAT IF SHE OUTWEIGHTS THE DANCERS?

OKAY, BUT JUST A QUICK STOP, ALRIGHT?

OI! AI LOVE THIS SONG TOO!

BE THAT AS IT MAY, HE'S STILL GOT TO *LIFT* HER, YOU KNOW.

TRUE, TRUE. BUT--

HEY, DARRYL?

I THINK WE'RE ON TO SOMETHING HERE...

THE NEXT AFTERNOON

I HOPE YOU GOT PLENTY OF REST... WE'LL BE SHOOTING ALL NIGHT.

AI'M GOOD. CRAIKEY, S'A LOT GOIN' ON.

AT THE BOARDWALK

THEY'RE USUALLY CLOSED FOR MAINTENANCE JUST BEFORE THE HOLIDAYS. IT WAS THE PERFECT TIME TO RENT IT.

OI, WE 'AVE THE 'OLE PLAICE T' OURSELVES?

YUP!

AI ESPECIALLY LOVED YER PERFORMANCE DURING WEEK TEN. EVEN MAI ROOMIE WAS IMPRESSED, AND 'E 'ATES DIANE SALINAS! UH...AI THINK.

ANYWAY, YOU KNOW ELLIS ALREADY. BUT I'D LIKE YOU TO MEET--

OI, NO INTRODUCTION NECESSARY! MS BROWN, AI'M JAKE.

NICE TO MEET YOU.

BUT PLEASE-- CALL ME JAMIE!

OH? WOT DID 'E DO?

WHY THANK YOU, THAT'S SO SWEET... Y'KNOW, YOU'RE A LOT NICER THAN THE LAST DANCER WE HAD.

HEY, LOOK AT THE TIME...C'MON, YOU'VE GOT A TON OF REHEARSING TO DO.

SEE YOU SOON!

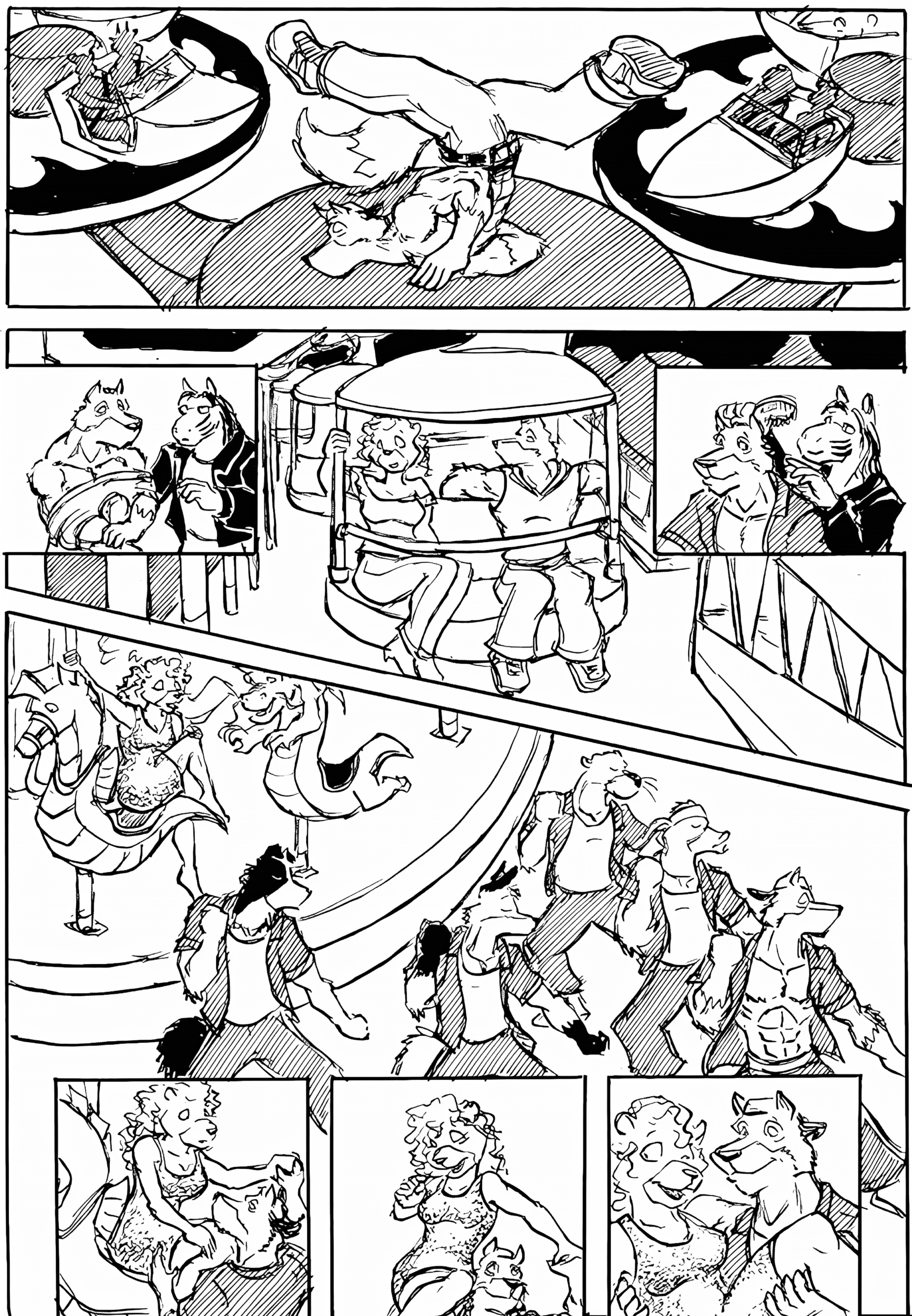
BAI!

OOH. FLUFFY. GOOD THING TOO, YOU MAY NEED IT.

OI?

YEAH, YOU'LL HAVE TO LOSE THE SHIRT FOR SOME OF THE SHOTS. MIGHT GET COLD!

D'OH!



OOOH, THAT'S GOING TO BE YOUR NEXT SINGLE? COOL!

YUP! OH HEY, YOU CAN FOLLOW ME ON NATTER, I MAKE ANNOUNCEMENTS LIKE THAT ALL THE TIME. I'M ON AS "BIGBROWNEYES."

WILL DO!

SO, I UH, HOPE MY COUSIN WASN'T TOO MUCH OF A HANDFUL FOR YA?

NO, NOT AT ALL! IN FACT, HE WAS A COMPLETE GENTLEMAN...

UNLIKE THAT OTHER CREEP THEY HIRED.

HE WAS?!

ACTUALLY, I LOVED WORKING WITH HIM SO MUCH, I'VE ASKED HIM TO BE A BACKUP DANCER FOR MY TOUR THIS SUMMER.

SERIOUSLY? HE MUST BE THRILLED! WHERE IS HE?

I THINK HE'S STILL IN WARDROBE--OH, THERE HE IS!

WHUMP

JAKE! WE JUST HEARD!

CONGRATULATIONS! I'M SO HAPPY FOR YOU!

YOUR BIG BRE SEE THE WORLD

LY EXCITI

H FUN!

THIS MUST BE LIKE A DREAM COME TRUE, EH?

AWW, THE POOR THING! HE WAS GOING FULL STEAM ALL NIGHT, HE MUST BE EXHAUSTED.

THAT'S WEIRD; USUALLY HE HAS NO TROUBLE-- OOF! HEY!

UH... JAKE?

ZZZZZZZ...

MEANWHILE, BACK AT DEMONTFORT

YOU SURE I SHOULD BE HERE FOR THIS?

MAUREEN SAID SHE'D LIKE TO TALK TO YOU TOO. JUST HANG TIGHT IN HERE, OKAY?

I WONDER HOW IT'S GOING IN THERE..

SO...I DON'T EVEN KNOW WHERE TO BEGIN.

"SORRY" MIGHT BE A GOOD PLACE. GOT PLENTY OF OTHER SUGGESTIONS, IF YOU NEED 'EM.

FAIR ENOUGH... I'M SORRY. I'M SURE YOU CAN UNDERSTAND WHY I WASN'T THINKING CLEARLY AFTER EVERYTHING... IMPLODED. BUT, I SHOULDN'T HAVE TAKEN IT OUT ON YOU.

I'LL SAY. OKAY, I HAD A MOMENT OF WEAKNESS, AND IT SURE AS HELL TAUGHT ME TO NEVER GET THAT DRUNK *EVER* AGAIN. BUT HOW WAS I TO KNOW IT'D TURN OUT THAT WAY?

YES, I KNOW... I LASHED OUT. BUT I WASN'T GOING TO KEEP IT UP FOREVER. JUST--

JUST WHAT? JUST LONG ENOUGH TO RUIN SOMEONE ELSE'S LIFE?

LEMME GUESS, WAS IT GOING TO BE AN EYE FOR AN EYE, AND GO ON AS LONG AS YOU WERE DATING WENDELL?

OR... MAYBE ABOUT AS LONG AS YOU WERE PLANNING TO STAY IN THE CLOSET FROM US?

...

TOUCHÉ.

OKAY, FINE. MAYBE I COULD'VE COME OUT SOONER.

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BUT BY THE TIME I WAS READY TO, IT WAS TOO LATE... OUR FAMILY DYNAMICS WERE IN FLUX.

WENDELL'S RELATIVES WERE JUST SO... CONSERVATIVE. I ALREADY FELT AWKWARD ENOUGH HAVING A BLUE-COLLAR JOB AROUND THESE BLUE BLOODS.

I'D ALREADY ACCEPTED THAT I'D BE KEEPING A LOW PROFILE AROUND THEM. STILL, I WORRIED I MIGHT JEOPARDIZE YOUR ENGAGEMENT IF THEY FOUND OUT I WAS GAY.

IF ANYONE GOT SUSPICIOUS, I DIDN'T WANT TO PUT YOU IN THE POSITION OF COVERING FOR ME TOO, SO...

BUT WHO WOULD WANT TO BE PART OF SUCH A HOMOPHOBIC FAMILY?

IF I'D KNOWN THEY WOULDN'T ACCEPT YOU, I'D HAVE WENDELL GO.

YOU... WOULD'VE DONE THAT FOR ME?

OF COURSE. WHY START A FAMILY AT THE EXPENSE OF THE ONE I ALREADY LOVED? JEFF, YOU...YOU WERE ALL I HAD LEFT.

AND YOU WERE ALL *I* HAD LEFT.

THAT'S WHY I WANTED TO KEEP YOU HAPPY.

HEY, I DON'T GET IT. ***NOW*** YOU TALK ABOUT BEING THE PROTECTIVE BIG SIS, STICKING UP FOR HER FAIRY BABY BROTHER. BUT WHERE WERE YOU AFTER WENDELL WAS OUTED?

YOU SEEMED PRETTY QUICK TO WRITE ME OUT OF YOUR LIFE THEN, DIDN'T YOU?

THAT'S BECAUSE YOU'D ALREADY DONE SO YOURSELF.

HUH?

OKAY, I ADMIT I WAS FURIOUS AT FIRST.

CAN YOU BLAME ME?

YES, I WAS AVOIDING YOUR CALLS; I COULDN'T DEAL THE FINAL BLOW OVER THE PHONE.

I KNEW IF I COULDN'T DO IT WITHOUT LOOKING YOU IN THE EYE, THEN I WAS IN THE WRONG.

SO I CAME BY ONE EVENING AND... THAT'S WHEN I SAW HIM.

JEREMY?

YES. YOUR... BOYFRIEND.

IT WAS SOON QUITE CLEAR HE WAS NO ONE-NIGHT FLING... THIS WAS SOMEONE YOU KNEW WELL... FOR MONTHS, PROBABLY.

JEFF, YOU'D... CREATED ANOTHER WHOLE LIFE FOR YOURSELF. WE'D NEVER BEEN PARTICULARLY CLOSE, BUT I COULDN'T BELIEVE THAT MUCH HAD GONE UNDER MY RADAR.

I REALIZED I BARELY KNEW YOU, AND IT WAS A SLAP IN THE FACE BECAUSE YOU'D KEPT ME AT BAY ON PURPOSE.

YOU AT LEAST HAD MET WENDELL. I'D NEVER EVEN **HEARD** ABOUT THIS JEREMY. IF HE WAS SO IMPORTANT TO YOU, I WOULD'VE WANTED TO KNOW.

MOM AND DAD WOULD'VE WANTED TO KNOW.

C'MON, I WAS STILL FIGURING THINGS OUT WHEN THEY DIED.

BUT YOU WERE PRETTY CERTAIN BEFORE THEN, RIGHT?

I...

...WAS, YES.

MOM AND DAD HAD TO HAVE BEEN TWO OF THE MOST OPEN-MINDED PEOPLE ON THE PLANET! WHAT COULD YOU POSSIBLY HAVE BEEN WORRIED ABOUT?

I DUNNO. I JUST...NEVER COULD FIND THE RIGHT TIME TO BRING IT UP.

WELL, WHY DIDN'T YOU JUST WAIT 'TIL THEY WERE...Y'KNOW.

PUFF

WHA? HA! HOW'D YOU KNOW ABOUT THAT?

IT WASN'T HARD. THEY ASSUMED THAT JUST BECAUSE I WAS A BOOKWORM, I NEVER PAID ATTENTION TO THEIR... "SMOKING BREAKS." THEY GOT CARELESS.

WHEN DID **YOU** FIND OUT?

OH. UM. A COUPLE TIMES THEY SAID THEY, UH, WISHED YOU HAD SOME...HELP RELAXING. CUZ YOU ALWAYS STUDIED DAY AND NIGHT.

N-NOT THAT IT WAS A BAD THING! IT'S JUST...A JOKE, KINDA. AHEH.

SEE? YOU SHOULDN'T HAVE STALLED. THEY WOULD TALK TO ***YOU*** ABOUT ANYTHING. ME...I WAS JUST MISS GOODY-TWO SHOES...

AW, C'MON SIS, THEY DIDN'T THINK--

OOOOKAY, FINE. MAYBE THAT'S TRUE. IT'S ONLY WE...NEVER UNDERSTOOD WHAT DROVE YOU SO HARD.

BUT THEY ADMIRED YOUR SPIRIT. AND THEY LOVED YOU, MAUREEN, THEY ALWAYS DID.

I KNOW. I COULD TELL THEIR LOVE WAS UNCONDITIONAL. IT WAS ALL I REALLY NEEDED.

I MISSED THIS, JEFF. AGE GAP AND ALL, YOU'VE ALWAYS BEEN THERE.

WELL, I THINK WE'RE BACK ON TRACK NOW.

MAYBE I CAN REBUILD YOUR TRUST OVER CHRISTMAS DINNER...?

I'D LIKE THAT.

JUST... NO MORE SECRETS.

AND NO FRIENDS WITH SECRETS. PROVIDED THERE'S NO RUINING ANYONE'S LIVES?

RIGHT. JUST MAKE SURE THEY'RE NOT RUINING THEIR OWN LIVES THEMSELVES.

DEAL.

SPEAKING OF FRIENDS...DID YOU SAY CODY WAS HERE?

OH, YEAH. HE'S IN THE BACK.

YOUR PRESENCE IS REQUESTED, MY GOOD MAN.

GOTCHA.

CODY...I MUST APOLOGIZE FOR SPYING ON YOU TOO. WE... DIDN'T KNOW THE GOOD JEFF WAS DOING YOU, AND WE THOUGHT YOU WERE JUST PERPETUATING THE CYCLE. IF THERE'S ANYTHING I CAN DO TO MAKE UP FOR IT, PLEASE--

IT'S OKAY.

WHILE I, UH, CAN'T AGREE WITH YOUR METHODS, YOU KINDA HAD A RIGHT TO MAKE YOUR POINT. TO BOTH OF US.

OH?

JEFF, YOU'RE TOO SMART TO LET HER KEEP HARASSING YOU. I THINK ON SOME LEVEL, YOU AGREED WITH HER ENOUGH TO GUILT YOURSELF. MAYBE YOU FELT THIS CONTACT WITH HER WAS BETTER THAN NOTHING.

HEH. TOUCHE. BEEN PRACTICING YOUR PSYCHO-BABBLE?

A LITTLE! AS FOR ME...

THE FIRST TIME I TRIED TO COME OUT, I COULDN'T HANDLE THE TRUTH ABOUT MYSELF. THEN I BLOCKED MYSELF OFF FROM A PERFECTLY WELL-MEANING ROOMMATE, COVERED UP MY AGE TO GET A JOB, LIED TO MY PARENTS, *AND* DRAGGED ALL MY FRIENDS INTO THOSE MESSES.

EVEN IF IT'S NOBODY'S BUSINESS WHO I AM OUT TO, I WAS DOING THE JOB PRETTY BADLY ON MY OWN.

SO AT LEAST AFTER ALL THIS, I KNOW THERE'S GOT TO BE A HAPPY MEDIUM.

DOES THIS MEDIUM INCLUDE YOUR PARENTS?

UM...NO. ER, NOT YET, AT LEAST.

I MEAN, I WILL. REALLY. ONCE I KNOW I'VE FOUND SOMEONE. SO...I GUESS I'D BETTER START GEARING UP FOR THAT, EH?

HEY, WE SHOULD GET GOING...

AW, I CAN GET US THERE FASTER.

I CAN DRIVE ALL OF US.

LEAD ON!

MY CAR HAS FOUR SEATS. ROOMY ONES. THEO--ER, THOR CAN VOUCH FOR THAT.

GRAND REOPE

HEY GUYS!

QUITE A CROWD TONIGHT, HUH?

YEAH, GLAD EVERYONE COULD MAKE IT.

ACTUALLY, I DUNNO HOW SAFE THIS IS...WHAT IF THERE WAS A FIRE?

UH... I MEAN... IF...

UM...I THINK I'LL JUST, Y'KNOW, GO STAND IN THE CORNER WITH A BAG OVER MY HEAD...

AWW. WELL, BE SURE TO CUT A HOLE FOR YOUR DRINK!

SOUNDS LIKE A PRETTY STRENUOUS SCHEDULE TO ME.

OI, TELL ME 'BOUT IT. THANK GOODNESS YER WINT--UH, SUMMER BREAK IS LONGAH THAN OURS!

AND DUDE! I THINK JAMIE LIKES YOU!

SO JUST HOW TALL *IS* SHE IN REAL LIFE?

MUNCH

MUNCH

MUNCH

HAVE YOU MET THE NEW BOUNCER AT KYELL'S?

NOT YET. I'LL MISS FORRIN...I WAS HOPING TO GET HIM TO SMILE JUST ONCE BEFORE HE LEFT.

OH, I GUARANTEE I'LL PUT A SMILE ON THE NEW GUY'S FACE.

WHICH BOUQUET? WELL...WHAT SORT OF LADY ARE WE TALKING HERE?

HMM... SHE'S FEMININE, BUT NOT DELICATE. SHE LIKES RED... I THINK?

DID YOU HAVE ANOTHER FIGHT WITH KATHY?

YOU ***HAVE*** TO GET THE COLLECTORS' EDITION! THE COMMENTARY TRACK ALONE IS WORTH IT!

OKAY, OKAY, MAYBE NEXT PAYCHECK.

OOH, DIDJA FIND THE EASTER EGG ON THE SETUP MENU?

MAUREEN, IT'S ABSOLUTELY STUNNING! DON'T YOU AGREE, CODY?

WHY THANK YOU!

OOH!

ER... YEAH, IT'S... UH, PRETTY COOL.

WHA--DID YOU JUST CALL IT...?! *SIGH...* ***MEN!***

THANKS AGAIN FOR THE REFERRAL.. RALPH DID EXCELLENT WORK. AHEAD OF SCHEDULE, TOO!

HEY, CODY! WHAT CAN I GET YOU?

YER WELCOME, ANYTIME!

JUST A COKE, PLEASE.

AW...I WANTED TO SEE THE LOOK ON YOUR FACE WHEN I SAID "SORRY, YER UNDERAGE." KIDDING!

NOPE, HE COULDN'T GET OFF WORK TONIGHT.

AW, THAT'S TOO BAD.

WAIT... YOU KNEW??

I'LL SAY ONE THING, HIS GAME'S IMPROVED EVER SINCE HE MET YOU.

YOU KNOW...

I MIGHT HAVE MADE EVERYONE'S LIFE UNNECESSARILY COMPLICATED THIS SEMESTER...

...BUT AT THE SAME TIME, I ALSO BROUGHT THEM ALL TOGETHER.

MAYBE... I DID BETTER THAN I THOUGHT.

IT ALL WORKED OUT IN THE END.

HMMM..AND I THINK THERE'S ONE MORE THING I CAN STILL DO.

HEY MAUREEN, DO YOU HAVE A SEC?

SURE!

I GOT A LITTLE SITUATION HERE...AND I FEEL FUNNY ASKING FOR A FAVOR, BUT--

OH, DON'T WORRY ABOUT THAT, HONESTLY, I OWE YOU. WHAT DO YOU HAVE IN MIND?

SEVERAL MONTHS LATER...

WHATEV.

ALL RISE FOR JUSTICE CORNWALLIS.

SWEET, I THINK SHE LIKES ME! I BET I'LL GET OFF EASY NOW!

iSQ

CHAPTER 20

THE SEARCH IS OVER

LATE THAT SUMMER...

CORNWALLIS TAKES THE FINAL STRAIGHTAWAY! THIS IS FOR THE RACE, THE TOURNEY, AAAND THE STEAK DINNER!

IT'S NOT OVER YET.

CORNWALLIS WINS! THE CROWD GOES WILD!

D'OH.

I KNOW YOU'RE GONNA DIG UP SOME CHEESY EXCUSE FOR LOSING. JUST GET IT OVER WITH ALREADY.

UMMM...I'M TIRED CUZ...JAMIE BROWN'S SET STARTED LATE?

MM-HM. THEN YOU WERE UP ALL NIGHT FANTASIZING ABOUT JAKE'S DANCING, RIGHT?

I DID NOTHING OF THE SORT.

YOU KNOW YOU'RE THE ONLY ONE I DREAM ABOUT.

FLATTERER.

C'MERE, YOU.

ANYWAYS, WE--

WHOA, THERE, TIGER. NOT RIGHT NOW.

SORRY, BUT WE'VE GOT A BIG NIGHT AHEAD OF US. PLUS, NOW YOU OWE ME STEAK!

SO? TODD WON'T BE HOME FOR A COUPLE HOURS.

AWW.

YEAH, BUT I DON'T WANT YOU FALLING ASLEEP AFTERWARDS!

HEY!

THAT HASN'T HAPPENED FOR A MONTH.


I SHOULD BE ABLE TO UPGRADE NOW...
HUH?
C'MON, THERE'S TIME.
NO.
I'LL STAY AWAKE. PROMISE.
CUT IT OUT!
PLEASE?
GAH!
PWEEEEEEEEEEZE?
OH MAN! DON'T *EVER* DO THAT AGAIN.
AND JUST SO YOU KNOW, CATS FAIL AT PUPPY-DOG EYES.
POUNCE
TRUE. *THIS* IS WHAT CATS DO BEST.
OH NOEZ, RAEP TIGAH!

PANT
PANT
PANT

BACK'S LOOKIN' GOOD THERE, BIG GUY.

FEH. SHOWOFF.

WHOOSH. OH, WOW. THAT... THAT WAS--

HOT?

SMOKIN'.

MMM...

MMMMMMMM...

AW YEAH.

THAT'S THE SPOT, ISN'T IT?

YOUR TURN.

PURR
PURR
PURR

OH FOR-- THE LEAST YOU TWO COULD'VE DONE IS GONE TO THE BEDROOM!

*

AWWW, BUT I DIDN'T WANNA WAKE HIM. HE LOOKS SO CUTE WHEN HE'S ASLEEP.

I JUST DON'T UNDERSTAND WHY YOU HAVE TO DO THAT ***HERE.*** YOU'D HAVE YOUR CHOICE OF ALL THE GAME SYSTEMS AT JEFF'S.

YEAH, BUT WE'RE THE ONES WITH THE COUCH.

I'M NOT CUTE!

UH-HUH. AND THIS IS ***MY*** COUCH.

WE PUT A SHEET OVER IT, LIKE YOU ASKED.

WHERE'RE MY--OH, THERE THEY ARE.

THIS WOULDN'T BE A PROBLEM IF YOU TWO WOULD JUST MOVE IN TOGETHER. YOU KNOW YOU WANTED TO.

HEY, CODY'S FOLKS LIKE ME. I'M NOT GONNA RISK THAT BY PUSHING THE ISSUE.

WHAT ARE YOU WORRIED ABOUT? RIGHT NOW THEY LIKE YOU BETTER THAN THEY LIKE ME.

DON'T SAY THAT. YOUR DAD JOKED WHEN YOU WERE "IN THE CLOSET AGAIN" WHILE YOU SHOWED HIM THIS PLACE.

EH, ONLY CUZ SHE ALREADY KNEW...WELL, 'TIL YOU PULLED THAT STUNT WITH SAM, AND--

WE'VE GOT A BIG NIGHT PLANNED, AND YOU ALREADY SHOWED UP LATE.

DID YOU NOTICE MOM DIDN'T LAUGH?

DON'T YOU HAVE A STEAK DINNER TO GO TO?

HEY, WHERE DO YOU THINK ***YOU'RE*** GOING?

...

I STILL SAY IT'S NOT FAIR.

A DEAL IS A DEAL.

BUT I CAN'T BELIEVE YOU PULLED AN INSIDE STRAIGHT.

CHEER UP, YOU MAY ACTUALLY ENJOY THIS.

DOUBT IT.

YOU NEVER KNOW. I DIDN'T LIKE IT MY FIRST TIME, BUT NOW...!

AT THE VERY LEAST, CAN I STILL WEAR--?

NOT A CHANCE! TAKE IT OFF!

YOU MAY WANNA LOOSEN UP FIRST, YOU FEEL KINDA TENSE.

DEFINITELY! I MEAN, IF YOU'RE NOT USED TO MOVING LIKE THAT...

WELL, OF COURSE I AM! SHOULD I STRETCH?

AW, MAN, I'M REALLY GONNA FEEL IT TOMORROW, AREN'T I?

CRAP.

VERY LIKELY.

HMM...

THIS MAY BE OUR ONE AND ONLY CHANCE WITH TODD.

WHICH ONE'S GONNA MAKE IT THE MOST... MEMORABLE FOR US?

FINE, FINE, LET'S JUST GET IT OVER WITH.

OKAY, AAAAND HERE YOU GO!

WHOA! YOURS IS GONNA BE WAY TOO BIG, CODY! IT'LL NEVER FIT!

C'MON, JUST *TRY* IT!

TOLD YOU MINE WOULD FIT.

'S TOO BIG.

BUT IT WORKS!

YOU KNOW, THE STYLE WAS KINDA BAGGY BACK THEN.

FINE. IT'S TOO WARM.

NOTHING YOU HAD PASSES THE DRESS CODE.

THERE THEY ARE. HEY, LADIES!

CODY! JEFF! HIYA!

YOU REMEMBER KRYSTAL, NIKKI, AND JEANNE?

OH, I REMEMBER YOU!

HELLO AGAIN.

WATCH YOUR TOES, NIKKI. THIS ONE HAS TWO LEFT FEET BUT CAN LEG PRESS A HUMMER.

AW, I'LL BE OKAY.

MY EX WAS A NURSE, REMEMBER?

THE CLUB HAS A STRICT POLICY ABOUT CELL PHONES, SO WE'LL CATCH UP WITH YOU INSIDE.

WONDERFUL.

YAY!!

C'MON, KRYS, WRAP IT UP.

HANG ON... SINCE I HAVE YOU HERE...GEORGE HAS A QUESTION FOR YOU.

MY MAN! HOWZIT GOIN?

JEFF SAYS HI.

GEORGE! 'SUP!

HEY GUYS... I WON'T KEEP YOU LONG.

BUT I'LL BE GETTIN' READY TO MAKE THE CUPCAKES TOMORROW, AND... WELL, SOMEHOW I CAN'T PICTURE YOU EATIN' SOME LITTLE POOF OF RED VELVET. YOU WANT ME TO MAKE YOU GUYS A BATCH OF SOMETHING ELSE?

YOU GOT IT!

OOH, LIKE...MINT CHOCOLATE CHIP, MAYBE?

THANKS, DUDE, YOU RULE.

NO PROBLEM. I MEAN, YOU EARNED IT... HOW THE HELL DID ***YOU*** GET ROPED INTO A BABY SHOWER? AT LEAST ***I'M*** GETTING PAID.

WHAT CAN I SAY, JEFF'S ONE EAGER UNCLE-TO-BE, AND SOMEONE'S GOTTA KEEP HIM OUTTA TROUBLE. ANYWAY, WE GOTTA JAM...

OKAY, HAVE FUN. YOU TAKE GOOD CARE OF MY LADY NOW.

UH-HUH. DON'T MAKE ME COME DOWN THERE AND WHUP YO' ASS, JEFF!

BWAHAHA! OKAY, GUYS... LATER.

ALWAYS! NOBODY'LL LAY A FINGER ON HER BUT ME!

THEN WE'LL FORCE ***YOU*** TO DANCE!

AWW, WHAT ABOUT ME?

ALRIGHT, THEN.

SHALL WE?

THE END

I.S.O. STARTED AS LOOSELY PLOTTED COMIC STRIPS THAT ATTEMPTED TO TIE IN ALL MY BEEFCAKE CHARACTERS AT THE TIME. AFTER GOING BACK AND MULLING IT OVER, I CONCLUDED I COULD MAKE A FULL STORY OUT OF IT, BUT IT'D NEED MORE PADDING OUT. THUS, I TRIED TO SCRIPT I.S.O. OUT AS MUCH AS POSSIBLE FROM THE BEGINNING--I HONESTLY HAD TO, CONSIDERING HOW MANY STORY ARCS THERE ARE. EVEN WITH PLANNING, A LOT OF PLOT POINTS GOT CANCELLED OR FORGOTTEN, SOME BEFORE THE FIRST ISSUE EVEN CAME OUT. MANY OF THEM WERE HAMMERED OUT WITH THE BETA-READING GROUP, BUT SOME PREDATE THEM.
HERE'S A FEW THINGS YOU NEVER SAW IN THE COMIC:

--THE ORIGINAL PLOTLINE WAS A BASIC ANIME-STYLE ROM-COM; CODY AND DOUG WERE MUTUALLY ATTRACTED, BUT SPENT THE WHOLE TIME CAUGHT IN VARIOUS CIRCUMSTANCES AND ONLY HOOKED UP AT THE VERY END OF THE STORYLINE. SO YES, INITIALLY CODY AND DOUG WERE TO BE TOGETHER PERMANENTLY.

--SHORTLY THEREAFTER IT CENTERED MORE ON CODY'S ORIENTATION, IN THAT HE NEEDED TO BECOME COMFORTABLE ENOUGH WITH HIMSELF TO EARN THE ATTENTION OF DOUG, WHO WOULD NOT DATE SOMEONE IN THE CLOSET. CHEESY PUBLIC DECLARATIONS OF GAYNESS ABOUNDED.

--ZACH WAS PLANNED TO BE A THIRD ROOMMATE TO CODY AND JAKE. EVEN MORE COINCIDENTALLY, ZACH WOULD HAVE BEEN ON THE HAWAIIAN FLIGHT IN THE INTRODUCTION (ZACH IS A HAWAIIAN RESIDENT; JAKE HAD A STOPOVER FROM AUSTRALIA; AND CODY WAS THERE ON VACATION). ZACH WAS REMOVED AS THE ROOMIE AND THE SEATMATE, BUT ODDLY NOT SIMULTANEOUSLY.

--DOUG AND SAM WERE ORIGINALLY ROOMMATES (TIM AND DUSTY DIDN'T EXIST AT THE TIME), AND SAM'S OVERPROTECTIVENESS KEPT CODY AT BAY. DOUG'S MONEY PROBLEMS WERE MORE OF A KEY FACTOR, SO CODY WON SAM OVER BY HELPING OUT IN THAT ASPECT BY...I DON'T REMEMBER, WINNING A CONTEST OR SOMETHING CHEESY LIKE THAT.

--THE HANGOUT STARTED AS A GAY BAR; I WAS A LITTLE TOO INTO THE THEME OF GUYS BEING GAY BUT NOT LOOKING IT, SO IT TOOK CODY AWHILE TO FIGURE IT OUT.

--TYRONE HAD A FAR MORE MAJOR ROLE--BASICALLY TAKING JEFF'S PLACE AS CODY'S MENTOR, WITHOUT THE MUTUAL ATTRACTION OR FAMILY BACKSTORY. FOLLOWING THE STEREOTYPE OF BARTENDERS BEING GOOD LISTENERS, HE MOSTLY WAS A SOUNDING BOARD, AND CODY SOLVED HIS PROBLEMS JUST BY TALKING AT TY. I THOUGHT CODY WAS UNLIKELY TO GET SO CLOSE TO HIS BOSS, SO BORIS TOOK MOST OF THOSE TASKS. YOU CAN PROBABLY GUESS THAT THE HANGOUT WAS MORE OF A CORE SETTING FOR THE COMIC AT FIRST THAN IT ULTIMATELY BECAME.

--MEANWHILE, ALL JEFF DID WAS PRIME CODY UP FOR DOUG. I THINK A FEW INITIAL IDEAS EVEN HAD HIM WITH A LONG-TERM FATAL DISEASE (HELLO, CIRCLES!) TO WRITE HIM OUT OF THE PICTURE AT THE END. ***(CONTINUED IN THE BACK COVER)***

SO I FINALLY GOT PAST THOSE SCRIPTING HICCUPS, AND THE SKELETON OUTLINE WAS CREATED... BUT I STILL TWEAKED A FEW THINGS ALONG THE WAY.

--NATE AND ALL THE STUDY GROUP MEMBERS WERE CREATED ON THE FLY. AT FIRST I HAD WANTED THE KARATE CLUB TO BE CODY'S SOCIAL ACTIVITY WHERE HE'D MEET A PLATONIC GAY FRIEND...AND I CHANGED IT BECAUSE OF THE OVEREMPHASIS ON ATHLETIC CHARACTERS; I NEEDED MORE NORMALLY-BUILT GUYS. INTERESTINGLY, NATE'S BECOME ONE OF THE MOST POPULAR SECONDARY CHARACTERS.
RELATEDLY, ALMOST THE ENTIRE FIFTH ISSUE WAS CREATED TO GIVE CODY AND DOUG TIME TO DATE. IT MIGHT BE MY MOST NOTICEABLY SPOTTY PACING, AND THAT'S WHY.

--WHILE THE PARENTAL DINNER WAS ALWAYS IN THE OUTLINE, THE SWING DANCE DATE WAS DRAWN UP FOR PRECISELY THE REASON SAM STATED...TO HAVE SAM AND CODY FIRST INTERACT OUTSIDE OF WORK BEFOREHAND. SAM'S THREE FRIENDS WERE CREATED FOR THIS. SO, YEAH, THE EARLY OUTLINES WENT FROM ISSUE 4 ALMOST STRAIGHT INTO THE PARENTAL DINNER.

--I THOUGHT ABOUT CODY'S PARENTS (UNBEKNOWNST TO HIM) ENDING THEIR ISSUE BY DISCUSSING HOW THEY'D ALWAYS THOUGHT HE WAS GAY, BUT WANTING TO LET HIM ADMIT IT ON HIS OWN. MEANWHILE, THE DINNER ALSO HAD ADDITIONAL COMPLICATIONS WITH JAKE STILL THINKING BECKY WAS CODY'S SECOND GIRLFRIEND, SHOWING HIM PURSUING HER ACROSS CAMPUS, AND GETTING VERY CONFUSED WHEN SHE INTRODUCES HIM TO HER REAL BOYFRIEND. THAT ALL GOT CUT FOR SIMPLICITY'S SAKE.

--TYRONE IS GAY, ALTHOUGH I'VE NEVER STATED IT IN THE COMIC. THERE WAS A BRIEF SEQUENCE PLANNED AS SAM RECAPS DOUG'S BOYFRIENDS WITH CODY, AS SHE NOTES THAT SHE WANTED TO BE SURE DOUG'S EMPLOYER WAS OKAY WITH HIM BEING GAY. CODY EXPRESSES SURPRISE AND SAM CALLS TY OVER TO CONFIRM IT.

--JAKE'S COUSIN WAS ORIGINALLY A BOY (NAMED ALEX...FOR THAT MATTER, HE WAS A FOX!) IT WAS DECIDED THAT IT WAS LESS COINCIDENTAL AND MORE INTERESTING TO LURE ZACH AWAY WITH A STRAIGHT GIRL THAN ANOTHER GAY GUY.

--YES, CODY AND JAKE WERE ORIGINALLY PLANNED TO HAVE GONE ALL THE WAY. THERE WERE TOO MANY MORAL AMBIGUITIES THERE, SO I HAD CODY CALLED IT OFF INSTEAD.

--I ALMOST CONSIDERED MAKING JAKE'S AUSTRALIAN BACKGROUND ALL A SHAM...SOMETHING HE MADE UP JUST TO GET LAID. WHILE I NEVER DID IT, IT'S QUITE SURPRISING HOW LITTLE IT WOULD HAVE CHANGED THE OVERALL STORYLINE.

--BORIS WAS SUPPOSED TO SURPRISE EVERYONE WITH ONE SPEAKING SCENE, PRETTY MUCH THE SAME PLACE HE DOES IT IN THE FINAL DRAFT, POST-BREAK-UP (THOUGH WITHOUT NATE AND TODD). INSTEAD, I'VE TAILORED IT SO IT'S IMPLIED THAT BORIS SPEAKS JUST FINE AND THE CAST KNOWS IT, AND THE READERS ARE THE ONLY ONES WHO NEVER SEE IT. THERE WERE ALSO ADDITIONAL JAKE-DITCHING SCENES PLANNED, AND THE JOKE WAS CODY WOULD TAKE BORIS TO INCREASINGLY UNUSUAL RESTAURANTS (MEXICAN WITH A MARIACHI BAND, AN EXPENSIVE STEAKHOUSE, TEPPANYAKI, FONDUE). I THOUGHT THE JOKE GOT TIRED AFTER THREE USES.

--THE FIRE IN THOR'S TOOL SHED WOULD'VE HAD A MORE DIRECT RELATION TO THE PLOT--HE HAD OVERFILLED IT AS STORAGE, IN HIS FIRST ATTEMPT TO HIDE THE PLANTS FROM MAUREEN, AND A SHELF HAD COLLAPSED AND CAUSED THE FIRE. BUT HE WAS IN ENOUGH MORAL ANGUISH HIDING FROM MAUREEN AS IT WAS, NO SENSE COMPLICATING IT.

--THOR'S REDEMPTION HAD TWO OTHER SERIOUSLY PROPOSED POSSIBILITIES:
1) RESCUING JEFF FROM A CAR FIRE NEAR CAMPUS, OR
2) HAVING A HAND IN RECOGNIZING AND TRACKING DOWN DOUG'S EX STEVE.
I GOT PRETTY FAR ON PLANNING BOTH BEFORE SETTLING ON THE BAR FIRE.
ACTUALLY, THE INITIAL THOUGHT WAS THAT CODY WOULD MERELY PETITION THE HANGOUT TO HIRE THOR, AND THE POINT WAS TO SHOW THAT CODY HAD MADE MORE FRIENDS THAN HE EXPECTED OVER THE PAST YEAR.

--I'M TOO MUCH OF A SOFTY, BUT I DID START THE COMIC WITHOUT KNOWING IF THOR (AND MAUREEN) WOULD STILL ACT AS VILLAINS AT THE END. FRANKLY, I'M NOT SURE WHAT I WOULD'VE DONE IF I HAD. I LIKE COMEUPPANCE, BUT I'M NOT GOOD AT WRITING IT.

--JAMIE BROWN WAS ORIGINALLY A COUNTRY SINGER, WITH JAKE BEING DISCOVERED ON HIS OWN WHILE THE MUSIC VIDEO WAS BEING SHOT FROM A VIEW OF THE GOLDEN GATE BRIDGE. THIS WAS BECAUSE COUNTRY MUSIC IS ON AVERAGE MORE LIKELY TO HAVE TALL SINGERS (EVEN THE WOMEN), AND IT'S A SMALLER INDUSTRY IN AUSTRALIA. AMERICAN IDOL WAS JUST STARTING OUT AT THE TIME OF SCRIPTING, SO IT WAS ONLY LATER THAT I REALIZED IT WAS HELPING PROMOTE THE CAREERS OF PHYSICALLY UNCONVENTIONAL POP STARS.

--I CONSIDERED ADDITIONAL MOTIVATION FOR MAUREEN TO MARRY, LIKE AN INHERITANCE TRUST FUND, OR A FAMILY HEIRLOOM PASSED DOWN ONLY TO MARRIED WOMEN--THINGS THAT ONLY APPLIED TO HER, BASICALLY. IT WAS DECIDED HER SENSE OF JUSTICE WAS SUFFICIENT.

SO...HOPE YOU ENJOYED THE FINAL PRODUCT!



THX

BETA-READING:
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T. "NIEVE" MCNAMEE
B. "EXATRON" RINGSTAD
E. KETCHUM
J. "THE GNEECH" ROBEY
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THANK YOU FOR READING! IT'S BEEN A CRAZY FIVE YEARS, AND I COULDN'T HAVE DONE IT WITHOUT THE E-MAILS, PM'S, FANART, AND SUPPORT FROM ALL OF YOU. THIS MIGHT SOUND CLICHE, BUT I PROBABLY GREW AS MUCH DURING THIS COMIC AS CODY DID, AND I'M GLAD TO HAVE HAD YOU ABOARD FOR THE RIDE! I HOPE YOU ENJOYED IT AS MUCH AS I HAVE. I DON'T KNOW WHAT'S IN STORE FOR ME NOW, BUT I'LL CATCH YOU ALL AROUND SOON ENOUGH!